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AN ANALYSIS OF OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP: FIELD MARSHAL  
ERICH VON MANSTEIN (U)

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial  
satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not  
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## ABSTRACT

### An Analysis of Operational Leadership: Field Marshal Erich von Manstein.

This research paper is a historical analysis of Field Marshal Erich von Manstein to determine the critical aspects of operational leadership, using three selected major operations. The case studies are his campaign idea against France, in late 1939, his command of Army Group Don and Army Group South, from November 1942 through March 1943, and the planning for Operation Zitadelle (Citadel), in July of 1943.

Von Manstein's idea for the campaign against France provides an excellent example of operational thinking. During the crises at Stalingrad, von Manstein was given command of a hastily assembled army group tasked to relieve Stalingrad. His thinking, conduct of this major operation, and his strength of character demonstrate the powerful impact operational leadership has on the outcome of major operations. Operation Zitadelle is another example of von Manstein's innovative thinking. Overall, these major operations provide an excellent perspective of operational leadership in wartime.

Time and again, von Manstein achieved success where seemingly the odds were against him, some of the most stunning victories of the Second World War. I attribute this success to his operational thinking, his execution of those plans, and finally, the intangible elements of his character. An operational commander must have vision, understanding of operational design, skill in decision making, and strength of character. Essential to the character is intellect, strength of will, boldness and acceptance of risk. These are some of the elements that made von Manstein such an outstanding operational leader. They are imperatives which must be present in the operational leader if he is to be a practitioner of operational art.

## List of Illustrations

Map 1: The German and Allied Operation Plan 1940

Map 2: Manstein's Counterattack on the Donets (Donez)

Map 3: Operation Zitadelle and Manstein's Alternative Plan

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## Theoretical Framework

The re-emergence of operational art and the operational level of war in current U.S. military doctrine is an important step to fill what had been a gap in the relationship of means to ends.<sup>1</sup> This gap was the missing link between the national strategic objective to the tactical level, of battles and engagements, meant to achieve national objectives. Operational art is the employment of military forces to achieve strategic or operational objectives within a theater. It is the way that national or theater strategy is translated to the operational design of major operations or campaigns which link the tactical levels to the strategic aim.<sup>2</sup>

Implied in this definition is the importance of the role of the commander. The operational commander has the responsibility to interpret the national objective into a feasible operational objective that will achieve the national objective. Operational Art challenges the commander with three questions, requiring him to consider the ends, ways, and means, as well as the inherent risk.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the role of the operational commander becomes utmost in operational art due to his influence in the planning and execution of operational design. Therefore, operational leadership is the most critical component of operational art.

So what is operational leadership? The U.S. Army current doctrine defines it as, "the art of direct and indirect influence and the skill of creating the conditions for organizations to produce the desired results. Its purpose is to produce decisive results at the large unit level and that it is the wellspring from which all sustained unit actions flow."<sup>4</sup> However, this definition lacks the specific elements that an operational commander must use and possess to provide operational leadership.

The thesis of this paper is to establish the elements of operational leadership that are the most important. These elements are operational thinking, execution of the operations plan, and the intangible elements of the commander's character.

It is the operational commander who must provide the vision of what is to be

done, defining the best objective and end state that will produce victory . It is his operational thinking that must produce the appropriate operational design. This thinking is focused on the operational objective, centers of gravity, culminating points, determination of decisive points, and the lines of operations. Additionally, the factors of intelligence, deception, operational reserves and sustainment must be applied. Also, and most importantly, the operational commander must establish the right command and control structure that provides simplicity, unity of command, and properly delegates authority that allows for de-centralized execution.

During the execution of a major operation, the operational commander must properly read the events on the battlefield, using his skill to correctly assess the situation. His skill thus influences the accomplishment of the operation through the decisions made. His decisions must anticipate events before they happen to retain the initiative and must be made quickly enough to allow for agility. The operational commander's decision and actions must shape his area of operations to ensure the objective is achieved. He influences the outcome by commitment of operational reserves, obtaining additional forces, changing the priority of effort, and accepting risk to ensure sufficient strength at the decisive point.

Ultimately, the operational commander's character drives his operational thinking and execution. Character is shaped by personality traits. Essential traits are intellect, strength of will, boldness, courage, and a personality that remains calm under pressure. Intellect provides the capacity for analysis, knowledge, sound judgment, mental flexibility, and creativity. Will provides the steadfastness and mental toughness necessary to persevere. As Clausewitz stated, only the strength of will can lead to the objective and keeps the commander from giving up under stress and pressure.<sup>5</sup> In that respect, the commander's intent, his end state, becomes the one overriding expression of will.<sup>6</sup> Boldness is also an important attribute. Boldness produces decisive results, because a bold leader is willing to accept risk. It is this quality, along with creativity,

which produces new and imaginative methods to accomplish objectives. On boldness, Clausewitz stated:

The greater the extent to which boldness is retained by the senior commander, the greater the range of his genius. The magnitude of risk increases, but so does that of the goal. Boldness in the higher ranks is rare. The higher the rank, activity is governed by the mind, intellect and insight, and boldness is held in check. Thus, it is all the more admirable when found there. Boldness is the first prerequisite of the great leader.<sup>7</sup>

The personal courage of the commander allows him to make difficult decisions, lead by example, seek information through direct observation, and motivates subordinates. His courage supports his personality in times of crisis to maintain a calmness that provides stability and checks panic.

Field Marshal Erich von Manstein is an excellent example of an operational commander. He is considered by many as an operational genius. His peers considered him to be their most ablest general.<sup>8</sup> His military accomplishments support that conclusion. Von Manstein is credited with the idea that led to the successful invasion of France, the conquest of the Crimean peninsula, and preventing the collapse of the entire German southern flank after Stalingrad. Often, the forces under his command were outnumbered in men and material, and, as at Stalingrad, were faced with defeat. Von Manstein's operational leadership; his operational thinking, execution, and indomitable character, is what produced stunning victories.

This paper will examine von Manstein's operational thinking, execution of major operations, and his character through three selected case studies. These cases are his idea for the Campaign against France; his command of Army Group Don, during the crises at Stalingrad, the Soviet 1942-43 winter offensive, and von Manstein's counterstroke; and his idea for the conduct of Operation Zitadelle, in July 1943.

## Von Manstein's Operational Leadership

### The Sichelschnitt (Sickle Cut) Plan, 1940.

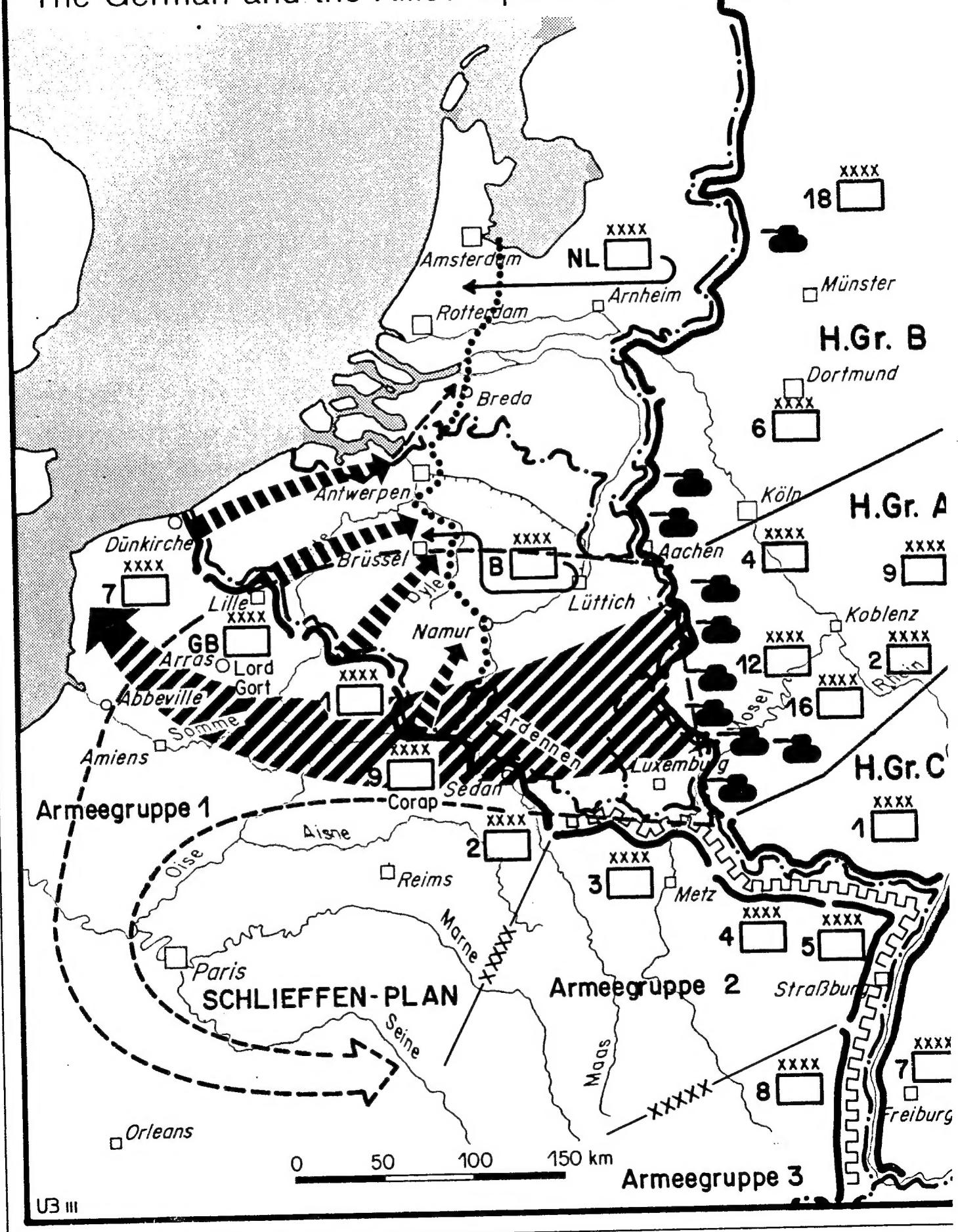
In 1939 after the defeat of Poland, Hitler directed the General Staff to develop a campaign plan to defeat France. Their initial product was basically a version of the Schlieffen Plan, calling for the main effort to be made by a frontal attack through Belgium and northern France. The effort was weighted by the placement of the majority of German panzer and mobile divisions to the army group responsible for the attack.

Von Manstein's assessment of this plan was not favorable. His concern with the plan was due to the potential result it could produce. The strategic objective was to defeat France quickly in a Blitzkrieg Campaign and avoid the stalemate and attrition warfare of the First World War. He envisioned that the proposed plan would produce operational success but not the strategic objective. His reasoning was based upon the likely outcome of a frontal attack through Belgium. The Allied forces could delay and withdraw from Belgium and establish a defensive line along the Somme River.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a replay of 1914 could result.

Von Manstein's idea was to shift the main effort through the Ardennes, hence the sickle cut plan.<sup>10</sup> His vision was to use the German panzer and mobile divisions to breakthrough the French line through the Ardennes and advance to the channel coast thus cutting off the Allied forces in Belgium and destroying them before they could escape across the Somme (See Map 1). Following an operational pause, the remaining Allied forces behind the Somme could be destroyed.

This idea had the potential to produce decisive results and achieve a strategic victory. It also avoided a possible German culminating point, as in 1914, when the German armies reached their culminating point within sight of Paris.<sup>11</sup> This thinking focused on one breakthrough and then a single-side envelopment,

# The German and the Allied Operation Plan 1940



basically, fighting on a non-linear battlefield. This exploited the capabilities of the armored divisions, the strength of the German Army. Attacking through the Ardennes with armored divisions involved considerable risk. But, von Manstein was one of few who realized it was feasible. He correctly identified the decisive point at Sedan, where the crossing of the Meuse and breakthrough were to occur. French military planners had failed to prepare for such a course of action.<sup>12</sup> The French also were thinking in operational concepts of the previous war. They assumed that the Germans would not directly attack the Maginot Line and that the Ardennes presented an obstacle to armored forces. Thus, the German main effort would be in Belgium. Accordingly, the French positioned their best forces to move into Belgium, along with the British forces. At Sedan were stationed light screening divisions and second rate infantry divisions. Von Manstein's sickle cut idea illustrates a sequence of operations, first a breakthrough, second a single-side envelopement, and finally the destruction of enemy forces. The idea is a testament to his intellect, vision, and understanding of operational design. This design placed strength against weakness at the decisive point and achieved operational surprise. Moreover by cutting off the Allied forces, he would be attacking a critical vulnerability by cutting their lines of communication.

Von Manstein's idea was not overwhelmingly accepted by the German General Staff. However, he had the opportunity to present his idea to Hitler and was bold enough to spell out his concept and rationale. Hitler liked the idea so much he took credit for it and the idea was developed into the campaign plan to defeat France.

Von Manstein did not play a major role in the execution of the plan. He commanded an infantry corps during the campaign and occupation duty after the fall of France. A point about his character and personality needs to be mentioned, regarding his values. He issued an order to all his forces that no German was to remain seated in a public service vehicle while a woman was standing. If she declined, the soldier was nevertheless to remain standing.<sup>13</sup> I interpret this order as an indicator of von

Manstein's morality as a part of his character. A related theme to his morality dealt with his belief in God. Talking to his lawyer prior to his trial after the war, he related while in the Crimea, some may think we were on the devil's work and they may be right, but I had a mystic sense that I was in God's hands, and without this sense I could never have kept my nerve.<sup>14</sup>

Relief of Stalingrad, November 1942.

The German 1942 summer offensive, as directed by Hitler, attacked along two axis. One towards Stalingrad and the second into the oil rich Caucasus region. By autumn, the offensive had reached culmination and lines of operation were seriously over-extended in southern Russia.<sup>15</sup> The flanks of the German armies at Stalingrad were covered by Rumanian and Italian armies. In November, Soviet forces broke through the Rumanian armies on both flanks of the German forces, encircling the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. The offensive shattered the Rumanian forces and then shifted effort by concentrating on destroying the large German Sixth Army, between 200,000 to 250,000 Germans were surrounded.

Von Manstein was placed in command of the newly created Army Group Don, consisting of the two shattered Rumanian armies, the surrounded Sixth Army, and the weakened Fourth Panzer Army. Facing this situation, he envisioned four operational objectives: first, relief of Stalingrad; second, keep the rear of Army Group A, in the Caucasus, free while it disengaged; third, prevent the lines of communication of the southern flank from being cut; and fourth, deliver a counterblow to regain the initiative.<sup>16</sup>

These objectives demonstrate his grasp of the strategic situation faced at Stalingrad. The strongest force under his command was cut off, his center of gravity the panzer and mobile divisions were understrength. On the other hand, Soviet armored formations had shown strength against the Rumanians and the one-sidedness

of the fight indicated they did not have to expend a lot of resources. Fourth Panzer Army covered the left flank of the forces in the Caucasus, a breakthrough here would cut off those forces. On his own left flank was covered by a Hungarian and Italian army. Therefore, the relief of the Sixth Army and getting the majority of the army with its heavy equipment out of the pocket became the initial decisive point.

Time was critical. The Sixth Army commander, von Paulus had told von Manstein of the lack of supplies reaching his army. Von Manstein needed to refit his own forces and get fresh divisions into his area of operation before he could attack. These forces were not readily available. Due to the danger to the German forces in the Caucasus, von Manstein requested they be withdrawn and some transferred to him. To illustrate his point, von Manstein had his 16th Motorized Division screening the 190 mile gap between Army Group Don and Army Group A.<sup>17</sup> Further, he planned for the Sixth Army to attack towards the relief force to breakout of the encirclement. In Manstein's view this was the only suitable course of action to pursue. Without this attack, he judged that the Sixth Army would be lost due to the supply issue and the lack of strength of his relief drive.

His strength of will during this time is evident. He rallied his mauled allies, established his army group headquarters from his old Eleventh Army staff and established command and control over his forces. Most importantly he visited Hitler to obtain freedom of operation and to get approval for his plan. Hitler had initially turned his plan down. After a heated debate Hitler again disapproved. Stalingrad would be supplied by air and the Caucasus was too important to withdraw from.

It took three weeks to assemble the forces to initiate the relief drive.<sup>18</sup> Von Manstein ordered the main effort to be delivered by the Fourth Panzer Army from the south. This axis avoided crossing the Don river and attacked weaker Soviet forces. A supporting attack was also conducted north of the main effort by a panzer corps. Throughout this effort, von Manstein tried in vain to convince Hitler that the Sixth Army

must breakout due to the insufficient supplies that were reaching the pocket. In fact, von Manstein conveyed to von Paulus to attempt a breakout regardless of Hitler's order if the survival of the army was at stake. The decisive point had been reached. The relief forces were within 30 miles of the Sixth Army but were reaching their culminating point. Von Manstein had a large convoy of all available transports following the lead elements. This convoy was to rush through and resupply Sixth Army as they attacked towards the relief force with their scarce fuel, ammunition and transports. Von Paulus under pressure from Hitler, the Soviets, and his own critical position did not attempt the breakout. By the end of December, the fate of the Sixth Army was sealed. The relief forces were stopped by Soviet forces and forced to go over to the defensive. The Soviet winter offensive launched strong attacks against Army Group Don's flanks and the Caucasus.

#### Soviet 1943 Winter Offensive and von Manstein's Counterattack.

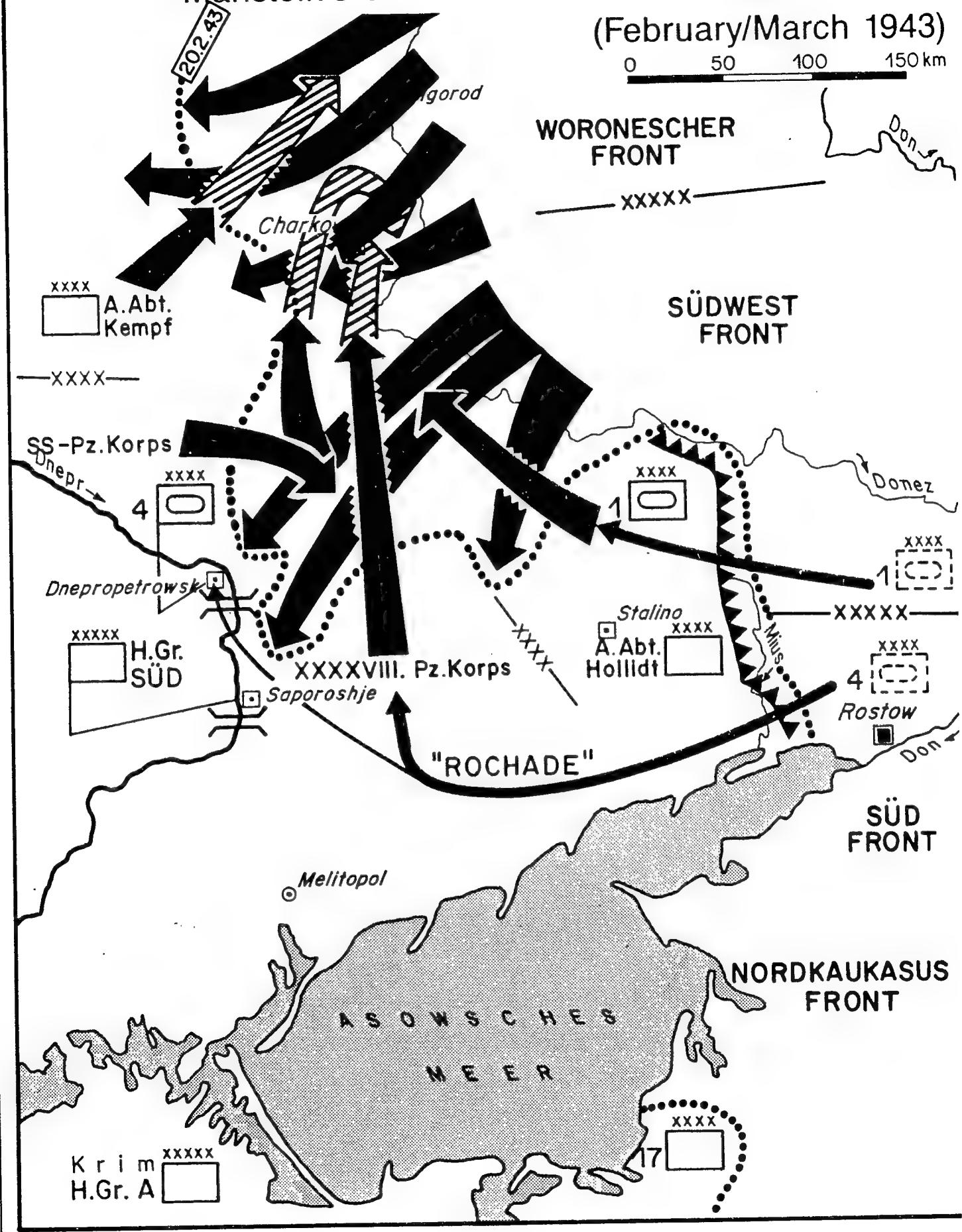
After the fall of Stalingrad, Soviet forces were now free to launch an offensive aimed at cutting off all German forces in southern Russia . If this plan succeeded, a super Stalingrad was in the offing. Soviet forces attacked towards Rostov along two axis to cut off German forces south of the Don River. North of von Manstein's sector, a massive Soviet offensive opened a 200 mile gap by smashing a German, Hungarian, and Italian army that had held the sector. The objective of this offensive was to seize key crossings over the Dnepr River, cutting off the entire German southern wing.<sup>19</sup>

Von Manstein's concept was to use the space he had to conduct a mobile defense. To generate operational reserves he needed to reduce his front, get the most combat power out of the Caucasus before Rostov fell, hold decisive points along his lines of communication and allow the Soviet attack to reach its culminating point. Then counterattack with his own mobile forces to destroy the Soviet penetrations (See Map 2). The loss of ground was not important to von Manstein at this time. The

## Manstein's counterattack on the Donets (Donez)

(February/March 1943)

0 50 100 150 km



loss of ground and his forces was important.<sup>20</sup> This was his argument to Hitler, to have any chance at success, von Manstein wanted freedom of operation. This time Hitler gave him the freedom to execute the operation.

He maneuvered his forces to shorten defensive sectors and delayed the Soviets. A decisive point of this operation was holding Rostov until both his Fourth Panzer Army and First Panzer Army coming out of the Caucasus were across the Mius River. While conducting this delaying action, von Manstein ordered his mobile divisions to execute tactical counterattacks where the greatest threat occurred. Thus, he was able to gain the initiative if only at local tactical levels which bought time for the delay. This action also hastened the Soviet culminating point by weakening the Soviet armored formations. Von Manstein used the German tactical strength against a Soviet weakness at that level. The centers of gravity for both sides were their armored formations because of the mobility and firepower of these forces.

By giving ground, von Manstein shortened his defensive front and was able to pull units out of the line. These units formed an operational reserve. The effective delay also allowed the transfer of units from France and other areas. Von Manstein allowed the Soviet advance to continue towards their objectives, fighting only when his own lines of communication were threatened and these critical points were strongly defended.

While the crises was still in doubt, von Manstein requested to change the command structure of the area of operations to give him more control in the threatened areas. He thus gained control over units of Army Group B on his left flank. Although it caused initial problems, it gave von Manstein greater control over operations. With this change, Army Group Don became Army Group South.<sup>21</sup>

On 22 February, with Soviet tanks within sight of his army group headquarters and their objective, von Manstein ordered the counterattack to begin. He assessed that the Soviet offensive had reached culmination and his own shaping of the area was set.

History validates his decisions. Von Manstein based his operational decisions upon essential elements of the appreciation of the situation.<sup>22</sup> His skill in making decisions came from his experience and absolute knowledge of the capabilities of his forces and those of his enemy. Consequently, he made more accurate assessments and made decisions quicker than his Soviet counterparts. Von Manstein used the German doctrine of Auftragstaktik. Mission type tactics, which in essence was the issuing of mission type orders. The practice gave subordinate commanders freedom of operation, using mission type orders and long range tasks.<sup>23</sup>

The conduct of this major operation is also testament to von Manstein's strength of character. Specifically his strength of will, boldness, and calmness during the crisis. His strength of will overcame Hitler's objections. Von Manstein understood the power of will. "Will is an essential prerequisite of victory. Will gives a commander strength to see through a crisis."<sup>24</sup> He also realized the danger of over-estimating the power of will if the leader is impervious to reason and the leader's will operates beyond the limits of hard reality. It was the combination of will, boldness, and his calmness that carefully calculated the Soviet advances. Von Manstein build up his mobile forces and positioned them along the flanks of the Soviet penetrations as opposed to using them to halt the attacks. Thus he strengthen his own center of gravity and weakened his enemies. When Soviet tanks approached his headquarters, von Manstein was told there was nothing left to stop their advance. He kept his calm and directed aides to muster what troops could be found at a nearby tank repair site to defend the headquarters.<sup>25</sup>

Von Manstein directed his counterattack into the flanks of the Soviet penetrations, to destroy each penetration in sequence. Again, this decision made it easier for his forces to achieve that objective. In detail, the Soviet penetrations were destroyed. By March, he had regained all lost ground, inflicted losses greater than the German losses at Stalingrad, stabilized the southern wing, and forced the Soviets into

defensive operations again. According to B.H. Liddell Hart:

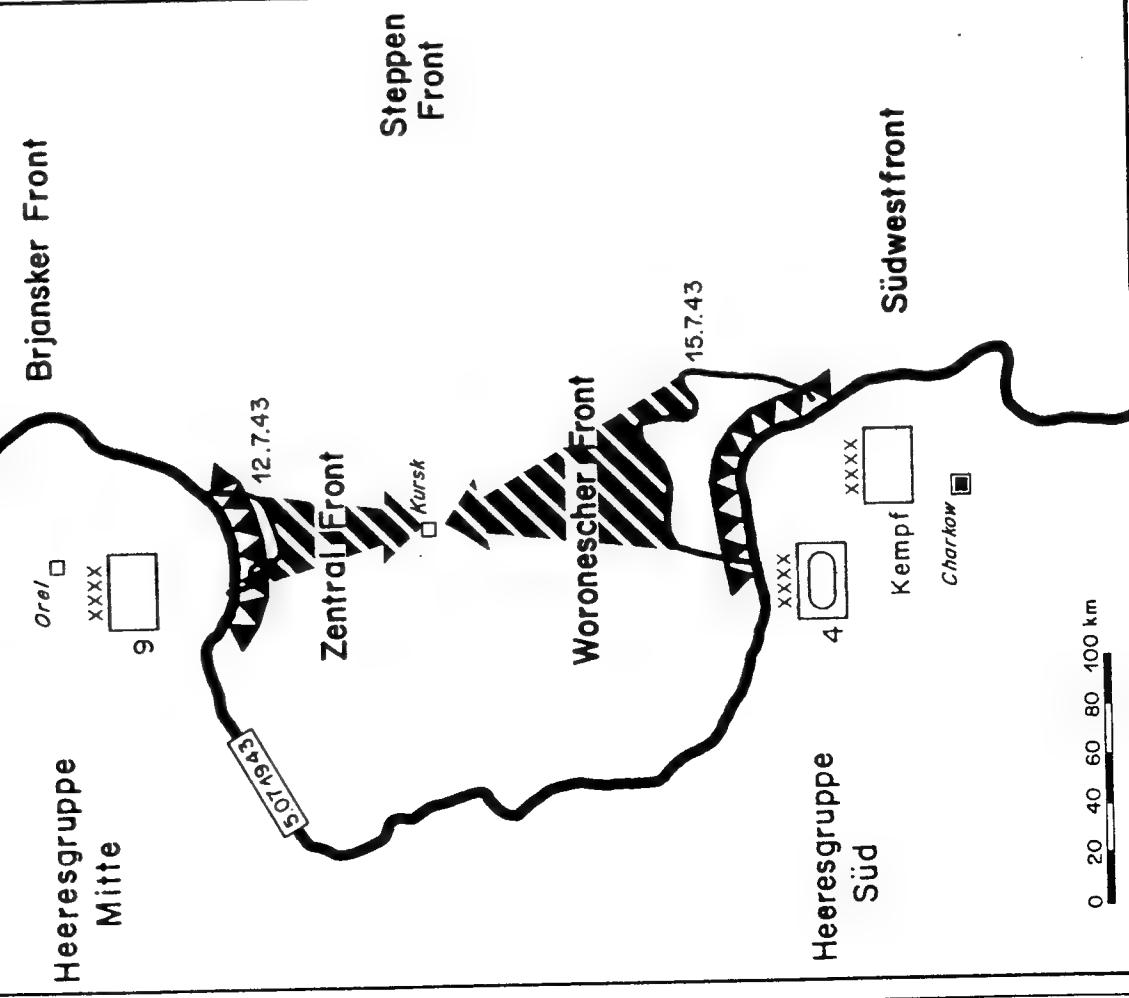
That counterstroke was the most brilliant operational performance of von Manstein's career, and one of the most masterly in the whole course of military history.<sup>26</sup>

#### Operation Zitadelle (Citadel).

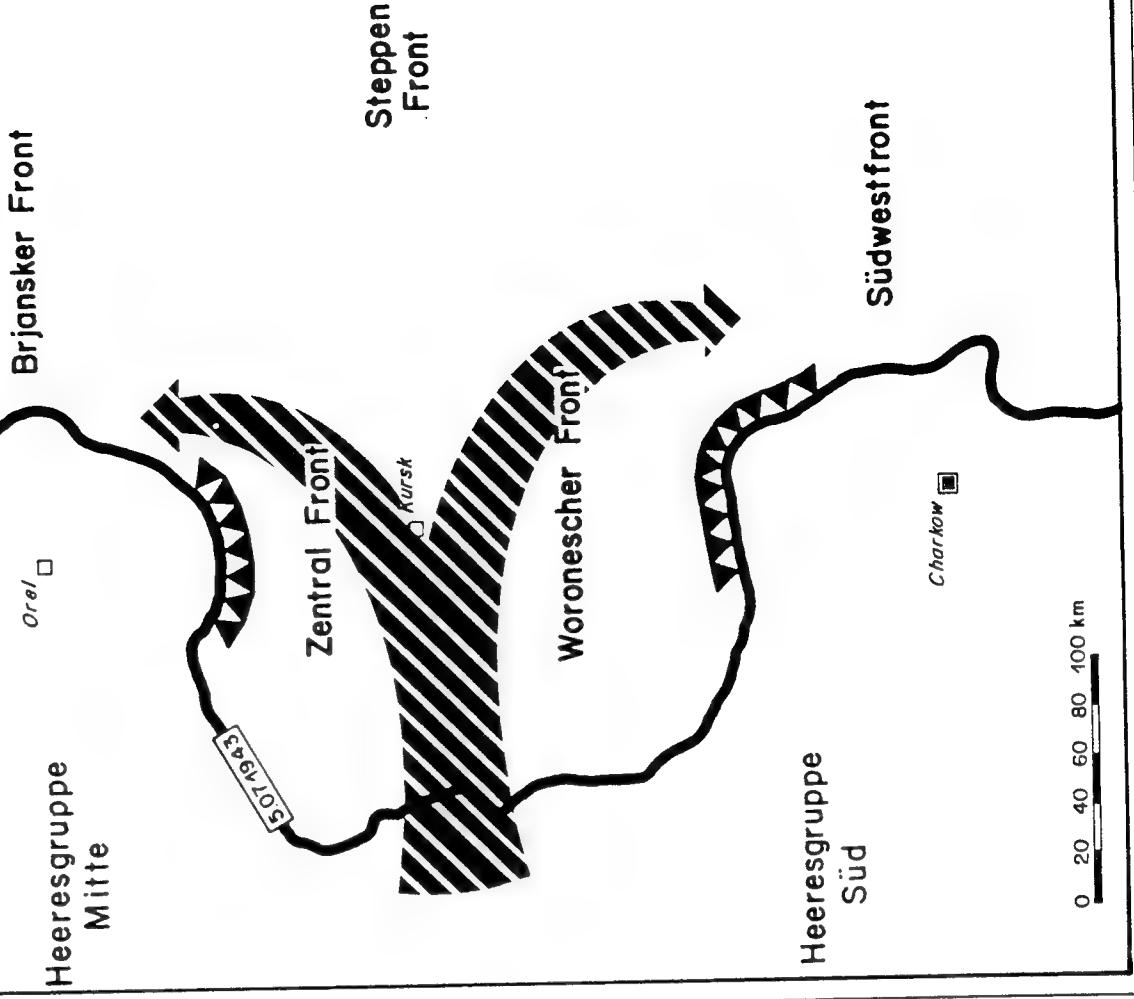
After von Manstein's successful counteroffensive, a large salient had been created around Kursk held by the Soviets. Kursk was an important objective because of its rail lines. Overall, von Manstein's favored strategic defense, with counterattacks, to wear down the numerically superior Soviets. He had suggested an operation against the salient to shorten the German lines after the defeats the Soviets had suffered in March. However, the winter thaw had slowed operations and the operation was further delayed by Hitler. Hitler delayed the operation to allow new types of German armored vehicles be used. Von Manstein was opposed to the delay and ultimately recommended the operation be called off due to the extensive defensive Soviet preparations.

However Hitler decided to proceed relying on the new weapons to produce tactical victories which would result in the overall return to offensive operations. The plan called for a conventional double-pincer envelopment at the flanks of the salient.<sup>27</sup> Von Manstein's army group would form the southern pincer. Along this expected axis, the Soviets made elaborate defensive preparations with strong anti-tank forces. Faced with this situation, von Manstein's alternative to this plan called for a single breakthrough from the west, at the bulge of the salient (See Map 3). By attacking from this direction, von Manstein wanted to attack where the enemy was weaker and then envelop his forces, using an eccentric rather than concentric method. This imaginative approach was not carried out. Hitler wanted no further delays since the operation had been postponed several times and he did not want to take the time to reposition forces required by von Manstein's concept. Hitler felt the new armored vehicles would be

Operation "Zitadelle"  
The planned pincer movement towards Kursk in July 1943



Alternative Plan:  
Eccentric (instead of concentric) pincer movement



decisive and attacked directly into strength of the Soviet defenses.

It is questionable if von Manstein's alternative would have worked also. The Soviets had positioned large mobile forces in operational reserve to deal with German penetrations, having learned about culminating points. However, when comparing the two concepts, von Manstein's had the better potential for success with a much better approach that would conserve the strength of the panzer division instead of attacking into anti-tank positions. By the time, the German and Soviet armored formations clashed, the German panzer divisions were heavily attrited before the largest tank battle of the war. The German defeat at Kursk became a true turning point.

### Conclusions

The success von Manstein achieved during extremely difficult situations is a powerful example of the impact of operational leadership. The essential elements of operational leadership; the operational leaders thinking, his execution of the operation and his character traits, affect the outcome of major operations and campaigns.

Von Manstein's example provides lessons that still apply today. Von Manstein was able to establish a broad vision of what needed to be done. He envisioned the objectives and method that would achieve the desired ends. He was able to establish his vision, communicate his concept to his subordinates, and ensure it was carried through. Crucial to this process, is knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of friendly and the enemy forces. This knowledge assists the operational leader to correctly determine the center of gravity and vulnerabilities of the enemy, while protecting his own. At the operational level, this focus should be on the destruction of the enemy forces. He fully appreciated the need for operational reserves in planning, especially for offensive operations, as well as when and how to employ those forces to control the accomplishment of an objective.

Von Manstein's operational thinking and execution was based on his willingness to accept risk in order to be strong at the decisive point. His skill resulted in the accurate assessment of the situation. This skill came from his professional development and experiences gained during the war. He made sound, timely decisions that resulted in the best employment of his forces. This underscores the importance of using historical examples for training today's operational leaders.

Ultimately, the impact of the human element is crucial in operational leadership. The operational leader's character must not be overlooked. Von Manstein was an intelligent man. His intellect was a product of his education, professional training, and experience. His professional development through the German military schools is a validation of the U.S. Army's current Special Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) with its emphasis on operational art. The point is to identify early, those who show the elements of a great operational leader.

Strength of will and boldness are essential character traits for the operational commander. Without these qualities, von Manstein would not have been able to overcome the crisis at Stalingrad. His calmness provided stability during the critical periods when level-headed thinking and decisions were required. These traits must come from within and they are the keys that produce the combat multiplier, in operational leadership.

In many respects it was in our best fortune that Von Manstein and Hitler disagreed over the strategy on the eastern front. True to his convictions, von Manstein's confrontations with his commander and chief finally led to his relief in March, 1944, to sit out the remainder of the war. It is interesting to speculate what outcomes could have occurred had Hitler listened more to his most ablest commander.

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26 von Manstein, p. 15. The forward in von Manstein's book was written by B. H. Liddell Hart.

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